

U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PAN-AMERICAN
March 8, 2001

During Spring 2001, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) El Paso Border Office, the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) hosted a series of six roundtable discussions in Texas and New Mexico to solicit input from border communities regarding how binational border environmental issues should be addressed. Meetings were held in Laredo, Edinburg, Brownsville, and El Paso, Texas; and Las Cruces and Deming, New Mexico during March 2001. EPA and its Mexican counterpart, Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), are currently working with the ten border states and U.S. tribes on a draft framework for the next border program based on the ideas and recommendations emerging from the roundtable discussions and other events. The following summarizes the roundtable session held in Edinburg, Texas on March 8, 2001.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The U.S.-Mexico Border Roundtable Meeting was facilitated by Mr. Darrin Swartz-Larson, Director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 6 El Paso Border Office, Mr. Jorge Castillo, Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) Border Affairs, and Ms. Diana Borja, TNRCC Border Affairs. The purpose of the Border Roundtable Meeting is to involve local stakeholders in the development of the new Border Program to be implemented in the year 2002. This approach to the program development process will foster the generation of ideas, suggestions, and comments of local community stakeholders, which will result in the creation of a plan effective in dealing with their unique environmental issues.

Mr. Swartz-Larson, EPA, made a presentation on the current Border XXI Program and plans for development of the new border program. Ms. Borja and Mr. Castillo facilitated a group discussion designed to solicit input from local community stakeholders regarding the new border program.

PRESENTATION ON THE FUTURE OF THE BORDER XXI PROGRAM

Overview and Background of the U.S.-Mexico Border XXI Program

- Binational program initiated in 1996
 - Legal Foundation: La Paz Agreement of 1983
 - Border XXI Program implemented through a voluntary, coordinating mechanism
- < The program is a strategy, a framework, a forum

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- < The program does not create any new laws or rights
- EPA and SEMARNAT (formerly SEMARNAP—*Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca*) are the lead agencies. Other participants include:
 - < Other Federal agencies:
 - Department of Health and Human Services (U.S.)
 - Secretariat of Health (Mexico)
 - Department of Interior (U.S.)
 - International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC)
 - < State and tribal partners
 - < Local and community stakeholders

Mission of the New Border XXI Program

- To work cooperatively toward sustainable development—meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs—through (1) the protection of human health and the environment and (2) proper management of natural resources.

Strategies of the New Border XXI Program

- Ensuring public involvement
- Building local capacity and decentralizing environmental management
- Ensuring interagency cooperation

New Border XXI Program Workgroups

- Air Workgroup
- Contingency Planning and Emergency Response Workgroup
- Cooperative Enforcement and Compliance Workgroup
- Environmental Health Workgroup

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- Environmental Information Resources Workgroup
- Hazardous and Solid Waste Workgroup
- Natural Resources Workgroup
- Pollution Prevention Workgroup
- Water Workgroup

Road to New Border XXI Program Plan

- ***Stakeholder involvement.*** The involvement of stakeholders is the primary goal for the development of the new Border XXI Program. Stakeholders include:
 - < States and tribes
 - < Local jurisdictions
 - < Community members (public)
 - < Environmental justice (EJ) and community-based organizations
 - < Non-Government organizations (NGO)
 - < Industry and local businesses
 - < Academia—Public school systems and universities
- ***Options for the Structure of the New Border XXI Program***
 - < Continue with current structure
 - < Modify current structure
 - < Implement a regional approach
 - < Others
- ***Time frame***

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- < Border roundtable meetings to be held from August 2000 through March 2001
- < Briefing of the incoming administration from December 2000 through May 2001
- < Public meetings to be held in Fall 2001 before the New Border XXI Plan is drafted to receive stakeholder input for the plan
- < Preparation of the Draft Border XXI Program Plan beginning in Winter 2001
- < Solicitation of comments on the Draft Plan
- < Finalization and implementation of the New Border Program Plan

GROUP DISCUSSION

A group discussion followed the opening presentation to solicit input from local community stakeholders regarding current border environmental issues and the new border program. This section summarizes the comments made by stakeholders during the discussion period.

What are the most critical binational border environmental and human health issues in this area? (i.e., what issues will require U.S. and Mexican collaboration and cooperation to address?)

- Water issues
 - < Rio Grande water quality and quantity
 - < Ground water quality and quantity
 - < Availability of potable drinking water
- Need for more extensive, bilingual, environmental education
- Air quality
- Preservation of natural resources
 - < Sustainable development
- Solid waste management

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- Public infrastructure
- Increased coordination between different local stakeholders
- Building codes
- Environmental health issues connected with air and water quality
 - < Exposure of people and wildlife to agricultural pesticides
 - < Communicable diseases (for example, tuberculosis)
 - < Other health hazards (for example, irritation associated with the burning of sugar cane)
- Community planning
- Quality of life
- Transportation of hazardous material or waste
- Community planning and development
 - < Local community should direct the design the plan. Several individuals offered their technical assistance in developing a community plan, including Mr. Arturo Garcia, Jr., Antonio “Tony” Barco, and Mr. Pete Martinez.

Who should be part of an effort to identify and prioritize the most critical environmental and human health issues in this area?

- Irrigation districts
- Soil and water conservation districts and commissions
- Water supply corporations
- Industry
- International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC)
- Non-profit organizations
 - < American Water Works Association

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- < Texas Water Utilities Association
- < Rural Water Association
- < Water Environmental Federation
- < Nature Conservancy

- Academia

- Lower Rio Grande Valley Water District

- U.S. Department of Interior (DOI)

- Texas Water Development Board (TWDB)

- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

- Texas and Mexico Border Coalition

- Department of Public Safety

- Public health agencies

- U.S. Customs and U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)

- Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy (SCERP)

- Maquiladora industry association

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)

- Local school districts

- Colonia leaders

- Elected city and county officials

- Ecology groups in Mexico

- Texas Rural Legal Aid

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- Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin Coalition
- McAllen International Museum
- EPA
- TNRCC

Of those organizations and individuals identified above, what should their role be?

- Community representatives should be included in decision-making meetings. Projects should be community-driven with state and federal entities serving as resources for the community.
- The responsibilities of each agency should be determined for a particular geographic area. Agencies should be grouped into issue-specific, focused groups according to their responsibilities and focus, such as air, water, transportation, etc. Each focused group should meet to discuss a particular local issue and should include local organization participants and community members.
- Focused groups should focus on one or two specific issues at a time rather than try to tackle a broad environmental issue. Local subgroups that mirror the larger focus groups that include state and federal agencies should be created to implement plans.

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What are the benefits and challenges of border involvement? Are you more likely to participate?

- ***Benefits***
 - < Improved quality of life
 - < Increased coordination between entities involved with border issues
 - < Increased binational understanding between cultures
 - < Increased financial understanding
 - < Resolution of common border problems
 - < Empowerment of future generations to make the sound environmental decisions
 - < Improve national visibility on border issues
 - < Opportunity for both countries to increase wealth
- ***Challenges***
 - < Support of the museum as a valuable resource for environmental education
 - < Lack of engineering resources for development, planning, and technical support
 - < The identification of available technical resources in the region
 - < Initial implementation of local plans and projects
 - < Funding
 - < Enforcement and regulation of binational environment agreements

What must the next binational border program include to be successful?

- Address one or two environmental problems at a time rather than broad environmental issues
- Funding plans

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- Routine feedback from community
- Environmental education workshops for local communities and industries
- Equal dedication of time and resources on both sides of the border
- Mechanisms that allow communities on both sides of the border to work as “one community” to address environmental issues and make environmental decisions
- Feedback on what projects under current Border XXI Program have been successful
- An awareness and appreciation of the cultural differences on the different sides of the border

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, meeting participants were encouraged to contact EPA and TNRCC directly with additional comments and suggestions. They were also advised that information, comments, and suggestions presented at the roundtable discussion would be incorporated into an option format that will be used to develop the next Border XXI Program Plan. A draft plan is expected in January 2002.

Meeting attendees stated that they would like to be more prepared for future planning and development meetings. They requested that the following information be provided to them prior to future meetings:

- < Brief summary of planned meeting activities, including topics of discussion
- < Narrative of related success stories
- < A meeting summary from the previous meeting highlighting results of previous meeting activities and discussions